"FROM GOATS TO TIGERS" April 29, 1973
Genisis 1:26-27
John 21:1-17

There is a Hindu fable told about a motherless tiger cub who was adopted by goats and brought up by them to speak their language, emulate their ways, eat their food, and generally to believe that he was a goat himself. Then one day a magnificent, full-grown tiger came along, and when all the other goats scattered in fear, the young tiger - who thought he was a goat - was left alone, afraid but somehow not afraid. The big tiger asked him indignantly what he meant by this charade, but all the little one could do in response was bleat nervously and continue nibbling at the grass. So the tiger picked him up by the scruff of the neck and carried him to a pool where he could see their two images side by side. When this failed he gave the young tiger a piece of raw meat to eat. The Cub recoiled at first because of the unfamiliar taste of it, but the more he ate, the more the truth about himself became clear. Finally, lashing his tail and digging his unused claws into the ground he raised his head high and the jungle heard his first exultant roar. ~~The goat had become a tiger~~. (See F. Buechner, The Magnificent Defeat P. 90)

There are a lot of significant differences between the major religions of the world. But on one important point they all agree. Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity are unanimous in their starting point: namely, that men - as they ordinarily exist in the world are not what they were created to be.

In the Judeo Christian tradition that truth is expressed initially inthe Bible in the story of Adam. God created man in his own image - but that image is badly blurred and marred before the story is over. God created man to serve him and other men in love, but Adam chooses to serve himself instead. Paradise is lost: God's image in man is denied: man falls from grace and is destined to live out his days somewhere "East of Eden"; that is to say, close enough that he is reminded of what could have been: close enough to be reminded daily of the sweet smells and tastes and the perfect innocense of the garden.

The problem is that we can't really be goats. There is enough of the Tiger left in us to make us permanently dissatisfied: permanently and notorously frustrated because

we are not what we know we could be. Like Adam - we carry around with us the memory of the garden as a kind of built-in longing for something more - something lost that needs to be recovered.

That theological analysis of the human dillemna has many secular expressions. The "search for identity" that seems to be an obsession currently in the psychological disciplines grows out of the very real fact that most - if not all - of us are not satisfied with the kind of person we have become. We are not who we want to be - who we know we could be. The "Human Potential Movement" with its heavy emphasis on personal growth and realizing our true self is based on the same reality. So, in a sense, is Women's Liberation.

To return to the language of the fable - we are so made as to be discontent with eating grass: we know there is something more to us. ~~Madison Avenue knows that about us~~ ~~that idea contained in the~~ . On the CBS News Documentary 60 Minutes Thursday night, television advertising - its philosophy, assumptions and techniques - was thoroughly scrutinized. The president of a large Ad agency argued that people buy new products because of the satisfaction they will receive in using them. "People buy happiness", he said. But then the program brought in Erich Fromm, a distinguished pshcyologist and author who took a rather different ~~tack~~. People know intellectually, he said, that one product is not substantially different from another. People know, intellectually, that washing your hair with a certain shampoo will not transform you into a ravishing, alluring brunette. People know intellectually that there is no way, regardless of what hair spray, mouth wash or deodorant they use, that they will one day come bounding through a field of waving grass, to meet in passionate embrace the person of their dreams. Intellectually - objectively - rationally - it is totally and utterly absurd.

But, Fromm observed, most of us don't live objectively. Rather we are somewhere between reality and fantasy: somewhere between the truth about who we are and the hope for what we wish we couuld become. Advertising holds up the hope that feeds our discontent. "Someday that just may happen to us".

There are different ways of dealing with our discontent. One of them is to ignore it: to accept stoically who we are and to place no more demands on ourselves: to dream

no more dreams. "Better to be a well adjusted goat then a frustrated tiger." Another way of dealing with it is to seek anesthesia in hard work, or drinking, or television. in the fantasy land of And yet, it rarely works.

In a sense, being a Christian only makes the problem worse: because a Christian is one who has seen what life was meant to be: a Christian is one whose Lord defines the hope, the potential. The late T. S. Eliot, the poet everyone quotes but nobody understands, once wrote, "In the juvenescence of the year comes Christ the Tiger." I don't know but I presume he was referring to the Hindu fable. He was saying that a Christian is a tiger cub who thinks he is a goat, but who has seen The Tiger: the real thing.

Once that has happened, a person either has to change - or get rid of the tiger. Once we have looked up from our half-alive grazing and locked eyes with Jesus Christ, nothing can be the same. Our discontent is amplified - and we must be transformed - or we must crucify him.

All of that by way of introduction to what I have always thought was one of the most interesting and intriguing and moving incidents in the Gospel narrative: the post resurrection appearence of Jesus to his disciples on the beach and the strange interrogation fo Peter.

Peter, I would suggest to you, was the goat. Alone among the disciples he was ready to fight it out with the guards at the Garden when Jesus was arrested. Alone he tagged along to the late night trial. But then, when he was recognized as a Galilean in the courtyeard, he had denied knowing Jesus, not once, not twice, but three times. He was a courageous man - but his courage put him in a position where his cowardice was also exposed. The others had not followed to the court yard = nor had the others denied their Lord. And to make matters worse, Jesus had looked at Peter after it happened. HE WAS exposed - and that memory must have been indelibly burned into his ~~memory~~ mind.

So they had all gone back to Galilee, back home to familiar surroundings. And I can imagine Peter torturing himself, hating himself for what he had done: loathing himself because he had come so close to being the kind of man he wanted to be. He had almost said: "Yes, I know the man - he is my Lord and Master - I stand with him." That is what he wanted to say: that is what he could have said. But he had failed.

Thus it was Peter who said: "I'm going fishing." Work is a way of dealing with

frustration and discontent. Winston Churchill used to lay bricks. At Checquers, the country residence of the Prime Minister he would build a whole wall, have it torn down and then begin again. Personally, I know days when I long for the feeling of physical exhaustion and emotional fulfillment that comes as a result of digging ditches for eight hours. For those who don't do it professionally, there is therapeutic value in physical labor. So Peter said: "Let's go fishing."

From a hundred yards out they heard a man call them through the dim light of early morning. It wasn't unusual for someone on the beach to spot a shoal of fish and shout instructions to the men in the boat. But then John recognized him "It is the Lord." And Peter dived into the water, swimming and stumbling up the beach, leaving the others to haul in the nets and row back to shore.

They ate breakfast together: when he broke bread they all know who he was. And then begins the strange interrogation of Peter. "Do you love me more than these?" Three times the burning, indicting, damming question came. Three times - just as Peter had denied him three times. Three times he said "Lord, you know that I love you" And three times Jesus said: "Feed my lambs: tend my sheep: feed my sheep."

Peter became, history tells us, a saint of a man. After a life of discipleship in the service of his Lord tradition has it that Peter was crucified in Rome - upside down - at his own request because he was not worthy to die in the same manner as Jesus. Be that as it may, Simon Peter became a Tiger if there ever was one. And that experience on the beach with the Risen Christ, it has always seemed to me, was the turning point. It was there that somehow he was given the power to stop acting like a goat.

It's important, I think, ~~that~~ to see that condemnation and criticism, had nothing to do with it. Jesus did not condemn Peter for his failure of nerve: he did not ridicule him for his cowardice and duplicity. He did not drum him out of the corps even though there was ample reason. From that I think we can conclude that wallowing in quilt over our own failures is not the way to becomething something other than we are. Unlike his more zealous followers Jesus seemed to be singularly uninterested in playing on human guilt.

It is equally important, I think to see that Jesus did not simply deliver Peter a

pep-talk. He did say, plainly, clearly, "Feed my sheep." But the sense of it is not "You've got to try harder Peter: you've got to win this one for the Gipper." And yet I think that is precisely what a lot of us look for in Christian faith, and it is precisely what a lot of what goes under the name of religion dispenses: "Pious pep talks": - "try harder, do more, be better." The trouble with that is that it doesn't work. The best minds have always concluded that we dont't have it in us to follow Jesus Christ if all we have going for us is our own power: From St. Augustine to Reinhold Niehbuhr, theologians have called it "an impossible possibility.: For the fact is, Adam's story is our story. God's image in us is badly blurred - and to be human is to fail: it is to keep acting and looking like a goat.

It is important, I think, to see that Jesus initiated this encounter: Jesus came to Peter: Jesus would not let Peter go. There is discomfort in that - because it means that part of our discontent with ourselves is precisely the result of Jesus Christ coming to us - looking at us - asking us "Do you love me: do you really love me?"

And, it is important, I think, to see that there is both grace and power in the Risen Lord who keeps coming. He forgave Peter. That is obvious. He loved Peter - even though Peter had proved profoundly unloveable. And he did something more: he gave Peter the power to become all that he could become. And that, I think, is the point of our greatest difficulty with Christian faith. We understand, we believe, we give and do and try - but we back away from that business about the power of God in Jesus Christ to change us.

My good friend Jim Morin, at Trinity Methodist, in his Good Friday sermondealt with that idea, and told of speaking to a group of businessmen about the implications of Jesus' teaching about love and sacrifice and compassion. Afterward a man approached him and said what all of us have heard at one time or another: "You preachers are all alike: you live in an ivory tower: that stuff is OK from the pulpit: but in my world it just doesn't work." That is to say - "I'm not open to the power of God to change me."

That's whereit's at for most of us, I think. That's why we are so perplexed and repelled by our pentecostal brethren when they start talking about the power of the spirit and how it changed their lives: that's why we're so nervous about the whole idea of conversion - because it implies some unpredictable power that might just change us.

We pray - "Come, Lord Jesus" - hoping he won't
Sing "Take my life & let it be" - hoping that he won't do that.

There is no one among us who cannot identify wheith the Goat-Tiger fable. There is no one here who cannot identify, on rather intimate terms, with Peter. We fail our Lord. We fail our wives and husbands - our children - our friends. We are not what we know we could be - we are aware of the fact - and there is no one here who has not, at one time or another, said - "Depart from me Lord - for I can't cut it - I can't and I'm not even sure I want to be the man or woman you wnat me to be."

The promise of the Gospel is power: power to change: power to become. The Lord of the Resurrection is one who comes to the likes of Peter and transforms them: he comes to give life to the half alive: he comes to lead us into a new life of involvement and sensitivity and great joy. He comes to show us what it means to be alive and the promise is that he gives poer - power to become: power to turn goats into Tigers. AMEN

Father, forgive us our failure of nerve. And grant us courage to be open to yar son who ever pursues us: Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN